



## Representing Systemic Violence: The Example of Laundry by Anu Productions

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Volume 1

# Warwick Performance and Politics Network

## working papers



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# Representing systemic violence: the example of *Laundry* by Anu Productions

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## Introduction

This essay seeks to explore the theatrical or performative representation of the abuse of power, drawing upon Slavoj Žižek's discussion of systemic and symbolic violence (2008: 1) and relating it to the performance of gendered violence. It also draws upon Gay McAuley's concept of 'vanishment' (2006: 154-5), which describes a process whereby rejected or abjected individuals can disappear from public sight and discourses and so, ultimately, from public consciousness. The essay uses Anu Productions 2011 performance *Laundry*, directed by Louise Lowe at the Dublin Theatre Festival, as an example of work that attempts the representation of an historical and systemic abuse of power, to illustrate the discussion.

*Laundry* is a site-specific performance, staged in a former Magdalen Laundry on Sean McDermott Street, just a few blocks from O'Connell Street in Dublin's North inner city, at the Convent of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge. The history of the Magdalen Laundries in Ireland is now being documented by scholars like Frances Finnegan and Maria Luddy, and investigative journalists like the late Mary Raftery whose work brought many of the abuses of children and women to the foreground of public consciousness<sup>1</sup>. The Laundries took their name from Mary Magdalene, who in popular Christian lore is a former prostitute or immoral woman who repents and becomes one of Christ's disciples. The philosophy behind the Laundries was that 'fallen' women – women who had engaged in sexual behaviour outside of marriage – could work and repent there and so be redeemed. James Smith points out that the Magdalene Homes or Laundries were not peculiar to Ireland, but had a world-wide spread in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They shared common features of overriding characteristics: a regime of prayer, harsh working conditions, silence. They were a response to prostitution and were intended as a rehabilitative response to unsanctioned female sexuality<sup>2</sup>. By the twentieth century the Laundries in Ireland were housed in Convents and offered a community laundry service, though it is well documented that the women working there were not paid for their labour, and by the 1930s were often or normally prevented from leaving the Laundry unless a family member – in some places, a male family member<sup>3</sup> – signed them out.<sup>4</sup> Women were signed into the Laundries because they became pregnant

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Raftery's journalism for *The Irish Times* is available at the newspaper's online archive, but she also published a book-length history of the industrial schools with Eoin O'Sullivan: *Suffer Little Children* Dublin: New Island Books, 1999. Her unpublished play, *No Escape*, was staged at the Abbey Theatre in April 2010.

<sup>2</sup> James Smith *Ireland's Magdalene Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007: pp.xiv-xv.

<sup>3</sup> Emilie Pine states that it had to be a male relative, but this is not specified in all sources. Pine, *The Politics of Irish Memory*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

outside of marriage, or were victims of rape or sexual abuse, or were orphaned, or were in various ways disruptive of the dominant social order (including, it seems, that they were too pretty and likely to be a temptation to men). Those entering the Laundries were renamed, and in at least some cases their own names were lost – a number were buried in mass graves within the Convent grounds, their deaths not registered with the State and their given names not recorded.<sup>5</sup> The abuses in the Laundries were sufficiently grave for the UN Commission on Torture to have called for an inquiry, and for redress for the victims.<sup>6</sup> One of the most shocking facts revealed in the performance is the very recent date of this history. The Laundry closed in 1996, and the last woman was committed there in 1995, facts which distinguish the Irish Laundries from those in other countries around the world. While the history is too varied and complex to be easily summarized in a paragraph, it is described by James Smith as an ‘architecture of containment’ comprised of:

mother and baby homes, industrial and reformatory schools, mental asylums, adoption agencies, and Magdalen laundries. These institutions concealed citizens already marginalized by ... poverty, illegitimacy, sexual abuse, and infanticide. In its more abstract form the nation’s architecture of containment also comprised the legislation that inscribed these issues, as well as the numerous official and public discourses that denied the existence and function of their affiliated institutions’ (2007: xiii).

The show *Laundry* is part of a series of four site-specific, archaeological performances devised by Anu Productions under the directorship of Lowe. The company’s work is immersive, bring the spectators in small groups into a space and then structuring the performance so that each spectator experiences the work alone, interacting directly with the cast. Other works in the series include *World’s End Lane* (2010) and *The Boys of Foley Street* (2012), with a fourth work still to be created. The area under investigation is a square mile of Dublin’s inner city, the former red light district known as the ‘Monto’ and immortalized in the ‘Circe’ chapter of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. *Laundry* was met with a flurry of publicity, selling out all performances and winning the Irish Times Theatre Award for Best Production that year. The critical and academic response to the show has in part positioned Lowe at the centre of a particularly emotive chapter in Irish history, seemingly separately to her innovative approach to theatre-making which explores an immersive, individual (one-to-one), archaeological site-specific aesthetic. Lowe’s body of work is not essentially concerned with the history of the industrial schools, Magdalene Laundries, or other aspects of the ‘architecture of containment’<sup>7</sup> in Ireland but instead aims at ‘a forensic examination of space. Translating all the many levels of experience into performance, so that the performance speaks to the space and reflects the space and encapsulates the truth of that space; the lives of people who have inhabited it, its history.’<sup>8</sup> In some ways, her identification with this work in particular suggests that the female artist remains problematic in Irish theatre discourse – in the emphasis on the show’s documentation of women’s history and its exploration of a history of female victimization, as well as its emphasis on raw material over aesthetic form.

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<sup>4</sup> For a full discussion of the Laundries, see Frances Finnegan *Do Penance or Perish*; Maria Luddy *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800-1940*, James Smith *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Architecture of Containment, or the work of Diarmuid Ferriter and Angela Bourke. The religious orders involved in the Laundries have not made their files public, making access to recent information difficult to obtain*.

<sup>5</sup> See Mary Raftery, “Ireland’s Magdalen Laundry Scandal Must be Laid to Rest”, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/>, 8 June 2011.

<sup>6</sup> As reported on June 6, 2011 in *The Irish Times* amongst other daily newspapers: [www.irishtimes.com](http://www.irishtimes.com).

<sup>7</sup> James M. Smith *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Louise Lowe, quoted by Sara Keating ‘What Site Specific Really Means’ *Irish Theatre Magazine* 26/09/2009. <http://www.irishtheatremagazine.ie/Features/Current/What-site-specific-really-means>

## Experiencing *laundry*



*Exterior of the Magdalene Laundry on Sean McDermott Street, Dublin*

The performance begins with three spectators waiting outside the locked door of the Convent of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge on Sean McDermott Street: a double irony, the first being the name of the Order and the second, that the street was named after one of the executed leaders of the 1916 Uprising, with its Proclamation of a Republic that ‘guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally’.<sup>9</sup> The solid wooden door has a grille that is occasionally noisily drawn back, a pair of eyes becoming visible and staring out at the waiting spectators. I am aware that whenever this happens, we stop talking. Eventually the bolts scrape loudly back and the door is opened. A young woman in uniform, with downcast eyes, hurries out with another woman, both of them carrying bundles of laundry; the uniformed woman shoves the other into a waiting taxi and then runs away across the street. Another young woman, also in uniform, gestures us in without looking at us. We enter into a small square hallway with three doors opening from it: cells open to the left and right, and straight ahead is another bolted door. We are separated: one of my fellow spectators goes into either cell, and I am left in the hallway with the actor by the door, and given a bucket of whitish liquid to hold. The smell of carbolic soap is overpowering. Everyone I see is in the same uniform which resembles a convent school uniform with a shirt and tunic, with their hair scraped back, their faces impassive and their eyes cast down. I stand in silence in the hallway for a while and then the actor turns quickly to me and whispers that the bucket contains breast milk. She grabs it from me and pushes me into the first of the cells, gesturing the other spectator out. The scenes unfold as follows:

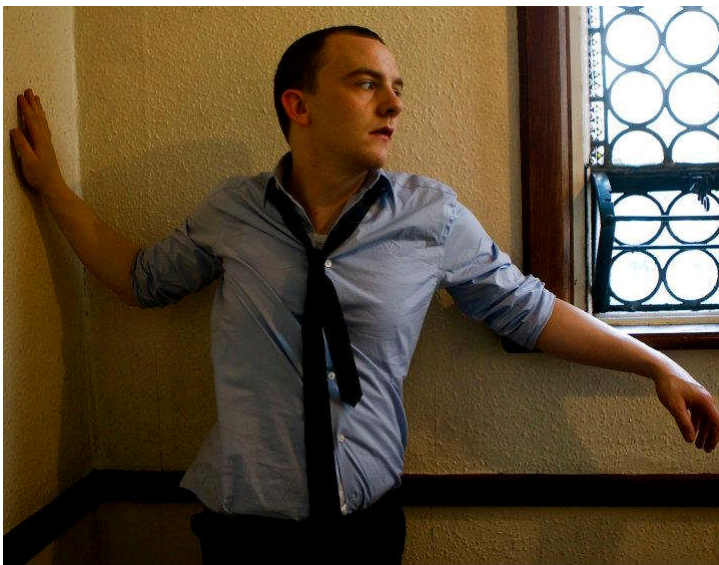
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<sup>9</sup> Proclamation of the Irish Republic, 1916.



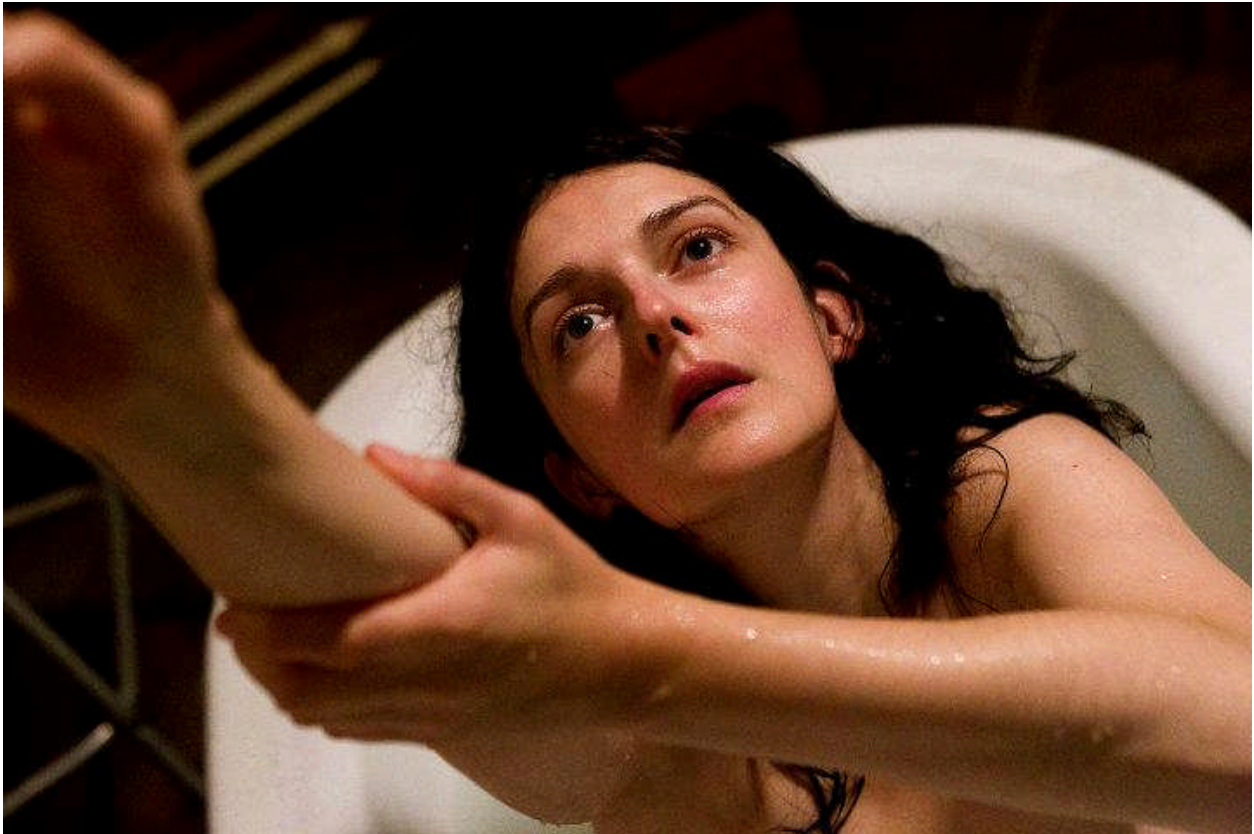
In the first cell, a young girl, obviously pregnant, silently pleads and struggles with her angry father. No words are spoken, but the performers' gestures and my own knowledge of this history mean that I recognize the scene as one with a father bringing his daughter into the laundry, because she is unmarried and pregnant. Their struggle often becomes physical: she rushes towards the door of the cell and he holds her and throws her back into the corner. Although she gazes at him, he averts his face so that he can't see her. I am so close to them that the despairing girl's hair lays on my knees as she sits rocking on her chair.

After some minutes I am beckoned out of that cell and pushed into the one opposite. Inside a young man sits on a chair, waiting. He asks the time, bangs on the door, calls out to the inmates. He is waiting to see someone – an unnamed woman, sister, girlfriend? She has clearly been committed to the Laundry and he is trying to find her. The reported histories of the Magdalene Laundries include testimonies from men who went looking for their sisters or girlfriends and were told that the person they sought was no longer there; this was not always true.



*Laundry* (Anu Productions, 2011). *The young man waiting.*

The door to the cell opened and I was beckoned out into the front hallway. At my back is a door. This door is opened, the bolts scraping loudly, and I am ushered through into another hallway with doors opening to the left and right. As soon as I am through the door it is closed and bolted behind me. It is very cold in the building and the light is chilly. In the hallway is a filing cabinet with the drawers partially open and I can see that it is full of soap, and cards with names on them, and swatches of women's hair attached to the cards and filling one of the drawers. There is a performer, who circles the cabinet watching me. She is reciting the names of women in a litany that seems to neither begin nor end. She leans towards me and whispers four names, urgently, asking me to remember them: Mary Brady, Cecilia Anne Brady, Bridget Brady, Margaret Brady. Like all the performers, she seems afraid of being seen speaking to me; she moves rapidly away from me and resumes her circling. At another point she whispers to me to look inside the cabinet. She asks me again to remember the names and she repeats them to me one more time. A room opens off the hallway to my right and I am gestured in.



*Laundry* (Anu Productions, 2011). *The girl in the bath*.

Inside this room is a tin bath. A heavily pregnant girl, the one who summoned me, sits on a chair and watches impassively as a young woman with bandaged breasts unfastens the cloth wrapping and indicates that I should hold it. Naked, she steps into the tin bath and sits, shivering. Beyond the room a baby howls and her body convulses in response. The room is full of the buckets of whitish liquid that I have been told before was breast milk. Women in the Laundries often developed mastitis but were denied medical attention. The young woman emerges from the bath and gestures to me to hold the cloth, and she winds her body until she is bound once more. I do not know what to do.

I am gestured from the room and across the hall, into another room where five dancers, all in uniform, react bodily to a text spoken by one of them. The text documents the abuses of Human Rights legislation that took place in this building.

I am gestured back into the corridor and through another set of locked doors. Again, the bolts scrape and slam, an aural expression of incarceration, as I move deeper into the building. There is a chair set facing a floor to ceiling mirror. I sit, looking at myself and at the wall behind me. Then the light shifts and behind the mirror I can see a young woman moving slowly towards me. As she moves along the line that links her to me, the changing light shows her, then me, eliding one to the other. As she draws close to the glass she implores me silently, through her gestures, that I saw her, to remember her, to tell others that she is there.





*Laundry* (Anu Productions, 2011). *The young woman in the mirror*

Finally she gestures towards the Church and I move in that direction. There is a walkway from the corridor to the chapel and it is covered in (human) hair which is silky under my fingers. As I move onto this walkway a young woman approaches me and asks if I can hear her baby crying; I can. She brings me to a wall with a peep-hole drilled into it, whispering to me to look through. I see a windowless room full of empty cradles. She asks if I can see her baby; she can hear him crying. Turning back into the church, she brings me along by the hand. Inside the doorway is a stained glass window set in a large alcove. Taking up a bundle of sheets, she climbs into the alcove and mimics the Virgin in the image, clutching the sheet to her breast in place of her missing baby.



*Laundry* (Anu Productions, 2011). *Girl by the stained glass window*

Hurrying forward out of the interior of the chapel, an older woman reaches up the girl and coaxes her down. She begs me not to say what I just saw. Leading me into the chapel she asks if I will sit with her a while. We genuflect (me following her lead) and sit in the pew. When we're seated she offers me a boiled sweet, and

asks if she can hold my hand. I take a sweet and say yes, she can hold my hand. The warmth of her hand and the sweetness of the candy give me some comfort. The character tells me that she left the Laundry to marry but that after her husband died she asked to re-enter, because she was afraid to be on her own. She describes her fear, alone in the house at night. Her life is difficult, she says, but in the Convent she will always be remembered and prayed for, won't she? I say yes, she will. I don't reply that she will likely be buried, unrecorded, in a mass grave. She tells me to go into the Confessional on the other side of the Chapel and I cross to it and enter one of the doors.



*Laundry* (Anu Productions, 2011). *The widow's story*

Inside the Confessional the space is larger than expected. A girl is drawing on the wall and whistling; she catches my eye, stops, giggles. Women are not supposed to whistle. She tells me a secret, sculpting herself a dress from the air, moving her hands around her body as she describes the tight waist and sleeves. Then on tiptoes she approaches me and dances with me in the confessional. She asks me if she looks nice and I tell her, 'You look lovely'. She laughs, then jumps back as the door opens. A young woman with a grim, downcast expression gives her a warning glance and beckons me out.

This woman leads me up through the church, genuflects at the altar, and hurries up the steps into the sacristy. She asks me to open the door to check if 'they' are there, but there is someone standing with his back to the door. She begs me to help her escape and I agree. She tells me the plan: she will accompany me out of the building saying she is helping to carry my laundry. I am given a pile of sheets and she takes another pile; she then hurries me out of the sacristy. We hurry back through the church – pausing again to genuflect – and out across the walkway. The first set of doors are unbolted and we pass through. The bolts slam home behind us. We go through the next set of doors, and the next: out into the street.



*Laundry* (Anu Productions, 2011). *The escaping girl, carrying sheets*

In the street the girl pushes me into a waiting taxi, with my sheets. She hurries away across the road and my attention is diverted by my driver. He is also an actor, and he drives me around the block while he offers a potted history of the neighbourhood. He drops me, with my sheets, at a local laundrette where I work with the other two spectators who entered with me, and hear stories of the laundry. After a while, the taxi returns and brings us back to the front of the Convent building. We are each presented with a bar of carbolic soap wrapped in brown paper, with our names and the date on it (Fig 1). Then we are released back onto the street, back into the centre of the city.



*Bar of soap with my name and the date on it. These bars of soap were presented to each member of the audience.*

These scenes, as they unfold for me, are slightly different to the experience of the other spectators as we are pushed and directed from one scene to the next, never overlapping with each other. The experience is also made unique by the individual choice of whether or not to talk and question the performers. Since there is no other audience member present, the memories and impressions of the performance are idiosyncratic and impossible to verify. One reviewer mentions the presence of a nun in one scene, but I did not see a nun and indeed, I thought that absence was significant; but there may have been one on another day or at another time. The overwhelming sensory impressions are the smell of carbolic, the touch of human hair, particularly on the bridge into the chapel, and the grind and slam of bolts sliding open and shut. There are necessary moments of humour, warmth and playfulness, however, which allow the spectator some relief from the fright engendered by immersion in the work. The girl dancing in the confessional in her imaginary dress offers a moment of imagination and pleasure that contrasts with the grief expressed by the work and hints at the moments of human optimism that allowed people to survive their incarceration. Similarly, the warmth of the performer's hand as we sat in the chapel and the taste of the sugary candy in my mouth was inexpressibly comforting to me at that moment of the performance.

### **Bearing witness**

In those moments of warmth and playfulness the characters' humanity can be recognized as tiny moments of Lehmann's 'present', or as moments of 'response-ability'<sup>10</sup>. Against a backdrop of uniforms, averted gazes, and impassive faces, these moments take on an enhanced vividness. The moments of recognition of a shared human condition are further enhanced by the spectator's immersion in the frightening space of the Laundry. While knowing that we are within the safe parameters of a fictional world, the conventional frame of the performance event is removed and is not reinstated at the end (there is no curtain-call, for example), potentially leaving the spectator with a sense of another haunted space contiguous with the natural or everyday world of the city; the performance reveals a glimpse of Dublin as palimpsest. These moments of response-ability enable an intersubjective engagement with the Other, the incarcerated: these are the moments that Kelly Oliver argues allow witnessing to occur.<sup>11</sup>

The use of a former Convent as venue allowed members of the public to see a space that was closed and forbidden: a space inhabited only by the consecrated and the Magdalenes. The physical, sensory experience of walking through the space, and the positioning of the audience member as witness to a re-enactment of injustices, and repeated appeals by the performers to remember, remember them, remember they were there, creates a spectator experience that encourages the audience members to reflect upon this history, the structure of the state that allowed it to happen, and their complicity with it in the moment of performance. Through this, the complicity of the society as a whole in the full scandal of the Laundries, and the whole state apparatus of 'containment', becomes visible and tangible. *Laundry* is both a document and an imaginative exploration of this apparatus. The performance ends with the spectator taken by taxi from the Laundry to a modern launderette in a nearby street. There, local community cast members discuss memories or experiences of the Laundry. A young man tells how he was born in the Laundry and was fostered, but his mother escaped and took him back, escaping with him to England until her father became

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<sup>10</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre* trans. Karen Jürs-Munby. London & New York: Routledge, 2006: 143-4.

<sup>11</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press: 2001.

ill and died. Only when he tried to go to university did he discover that he had no birth certificate. The story is told as a personal one, but it may be an amalgamation of other stories. It functions to give a human face and dilemma to the lack of concern shown by many of the religious orders for the legal documentation or with the identities of their inmates.

In the aftermath of the performance, the gift of the bar of carbolic soap, wrapped in brown paper, with the spectator's first name written on the label, becomes a sensory aide-memoire. It takes on a quasi-talismanic property, like the four names of forgotten women that each spectator is asked to remember. The soap-bar potentially presents the spectator with the problem of what to do with it. Given its connection to this suppressed history of discarded, abjected citizens, the act of discarding the soap or forgetting the names seems to implicate the spectator further in the callous violence of the Laundry system. Yet the soap smells strongly and unpleasantly, and the spectator who keeps it may come upon it occasionally and unexpectedly. The soap begins to take on an almost documentary function as well as a symbolic function: it is one of the surviving traces of the performance and its qualities link it to the history it documents.

### Magdalen laundries in art

"When a society is shocked into recognising its own ugliest face in the mirror, as ours has been with the Ryan Report, it needs a lot of things to happen... some of them are psychic. They exist in the area of ritual, of atonement and expiation – even, perhaps, of exorcism. This is normally the bailiwick of religion ... In this case, however, organized religion can't do the exorcism because it itself needs to be exorcised. What we're left with is the arts." (Fintan O'Toole, *The Irish Times* 30/05/2009)

Irish cultural critic Fintan O'Toole issued this challenge to the arts community in Ireland in 2009, on the publication of the Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (commonly known as the Ryan Report after its Chair, Justice Sean Ryan). The Ryan Report was established to investigate all forms of child abuse in Irish institutions for children: orphanages, industrial schools and reformatories which were run by Roman Catholic religious orders and funded largely by the Department of Education. Its findings were devastating. The conclusions include that physical neglect, emotional abuse including humiliation and degradation, physical abuse including brutal and degrading abuse, and sexual abuse were systemic and endemic.<sup>12</sup> Looking to the future, the Report states that: 'An important aspect of this process of exploration, acceptance and understanding by the State and the Congregations is the acknowledgement of the fact that *the system failed the children*, not just that children were abused because occasional individual lapses occurred' (my italics).<sup>13</sup> In his article, O'Toole continued, 'We must look to art for the rituals through which a deep psychic wound can be first cauterised and then, perhaps, healed.' Two years later, he wrote "The striking thing about the Magdalen story is that its resurrection owes more to art than to politics or journalism" (*The Irish Times*, 29/10/2011).

Diana Taylor writes that 'Traumatic memory often relies on live, interactive performances for transmission'<sup>14</sup>, because bearing witness is a live process and because it is one that relies often on narratives, stories, and personal memories at least as much as historical documents. The reclamation work

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<sup>12</sup> The Report of the Commission to Inquire Into Child Abuse / Ryan Report is available at <http://www.childabusecommission.ie/>.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.childabusecommission.com/rpt/ExecSummary.php>

<sup>14</sup> Diana Taylor *The Archive and the Repertoire* Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003; 2006: p.167



on this history has, as O'Toole points out, been mainly conducted by artists from various disciplines as well as by volunteers with the Justice for Magdalenes (JFM) organization. Evelyn Glynn's project with the Limerick School of Art and Design for her MA is one of those cited. A number of Laundries have been converted and subsumed into third level education institutions. The Limerick School of Art and Design is one, and Glynn's project attempted to document that traces of the Laundry that are still visible under the new archaeological layer of the School. Her project comprised an exhibition of photographs documenting the vanishment of the Laundry and a website with the photographs, interviews with local people about their memories of the Laundry, and newspaper coverage of the institution from different years during the twentieth century, available for viewing at <http://www.magdalenelaundrylimerick.com/traces.html>. The point is repeatedly made in these documents that the women in the Laundry had nowhere else to go. The 'Limerick Christmas Gazette' in the *Limerick Leader* of 1992, in a feature article, describes the attitudes of the time as "harsh and often in their time the Good Shepherd Sisters were the subjects of much unjustified criticism, mainly by those who were too ignorant to understand a situation where women were forced to undergo the discipline of a closed institution because the authorities and the people failed to come up with a more desirable alternative." The material from the 1950s celebrates in passionate terms the salvation of "delinquent and pre-delinquent" girls in the Laundries who decide to become Auxiliary Sisters to give good example to the others, though the material is somewhat at odds with the testimony of a Magdalene who says that: 'I was an Auxiliary for a good few years but I didn't stay as long as the rest of them...You had to say an office (your prayers) and you had to be careful and you got charge of certain duties but...it wasn't organised. We were nothing in the eyes of the church...'<sup>15</sup>

There are a small number of plays that address this history. As early as 1964 Mairéad Ní Ghráda's Irish-language play *An Triail (The Trial)* denounced social attitudes to unmarried pregnant women, and the hypocritical respectability that motivated their social exclusion. It, together with Patricia Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed* (1991) and *Stained Glass at Samhain* (2002) which draw upon her experience as a young nun in a Magdalene Laundry, are probably the best known theatrical examples. Prose memoirs include June Goulding's *A Light in the Window*, which details her experiences as a young midwife working in a Laundry in the early 1950s; and there are two significant and widely known films: the Channel 4 documentary *Love in a Cold Climate*, and the fictional *The Magdalene Sisters* directed by Peter Mullan. In fact, as James Smith argues, the refusal of the religious orders to make their archives public means that much of the documentation of this history is cultural and testimonial, rather than scholarly historiography (2007). It is the emergence of this private, whispered history into the public domain that is so emotional and so startling.

Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed* has been translated into a number of languages and performed around the world, and Mullan's film is widely known and discussed as a document of this history as well as a powerful means of raising public awareness and sympathy with this history. However, both offer the spectator a resolution and sense of closure that is not available in *Laundry*. *Eclipsed* is a harrowing piece of work that closes with a grim historical note on the fate of the characters: buried in a mass grave, or in one case, committed to the local psychiatric hospital for the rest of her life. The history of the psychiatric hospitals in containing Ireland's troublesome citizens is only now being recovered. But while Burke Brogan's work can move the spectator to grief and anger, its creation of a fictional world that is now fifty years in the past allows for a degree of aesthetic distance. Furthermore, the violence enacted on the Magdalen women has identifiable agents, though the complexity of the work allows the spectator to understand that their cruelty is motivated in part

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<sup>15</sup> This is from the testimony of a woman identified as Bridget <http://magdalenelaundrylimerick.com/brigid.html>. The project can be found at <http://magdalenelaundrylimerick.com>.

by their desire to help, to save the souls of the incarcerated women; and that the tormentors are also victims of the patriarchal state and religion they serve. *The Magdalene Sisters* also offers a dramatization that identifies specific agents of the violence: individual nuns, parents, and clergy; but it too draws attention to social attitudes to the young women; the complicity of the Garda Síochána (the police) in their incarceration, and the contempt shown to them by local people. Of the four central characters, three escape and one is committed to a psychiatric hospital when she reveals that the priest has been sexually abusing her. Again, situating the action in the 1960s allows a degree of distance from a history that seems farther away than the 1990s.

## Representing violence

In its use of an immersive, site-specific and one-to-one performance aesthetic, *Laundry* emphasizes an aspect of this history which is difficult to portray in a dramatic form: the systemic nature of the violence inflicted upon these women. The work, I would argue, makes visible a form of violence that is normally invisible and that is difficult for theatrical representation – with its protagonist/antagonist paradigm – to present. By blurring the real and the fictional in performance, *Laundry* provokes a series of questions for the spectator to ponder in its aftermath. In particular, it poses the question of how, throughout the twentieth century, it was possible for up to 30,000 women to vanish from public sight and discourse, and for the large and imposing city-centre buildings that swallowed them to both offer a community laundry service and to operate apparently invisibly as centres of detention and punishment. Gay McAuley speaks of ‘vanishment’ in her essay on one of Sydney’s detention centres for asylum seekers in Australia, defining it as a state of being vanished; a process by which rejected or abjected individuals can disappear from public sight and discourse while still in plain sight and so, ultimately, occupy a liminal position of being both present and absent within the society.

The Magdalene story is one in a series of revelations of systemic abuse of women and children that, over the past decade in particular, have come very much to the fore in Irish public discourses and consciousness. This is not peculiar to Ireland, and similar investigations involving other Christian churches have been taking place around the world. But in the Irish State, the Roman Catholic Church was integral to the systems of education, health-care, and the institutional care of children who were orphaned or in trouble with the law, often to the point of control of those services. There was also, until recent decades, an extraordinary deference towards the church on the part of the government; historian Diarmaid Ferriter writes that successive governments actively requested and sometimes demanded guidance from the Catholic Church, a step beyond passive acquiescence to religious dogma.<sup>16</sup> But the analysis of this relationship also yields something beyond the surface impression of a conservative and Catholic state: a whole series of anxieties about respectability and propriety and public appearance resulted in a deeply conformist and repressive culture that acted out its aggression and fear of its abjected ‘Other’ on its weakest citizens. These – particularly ‘fallen’ women and their illegitimate children, but other troubled citizens as well – are described in the official and popular discourses of the time in terms of disease and contagion from which the healthy citizen body must be protected, as Maria Luddy notes. An aspect of this is that those who were most promptly punished were those who publicly criticized or challenged the hegemonic structures of state and church, and conceiving a child outside of marriage can be read as an (unconscious) performance of such a criticism in its disregard for normative sexual regulation. The punishment was commonly incarceration, whether in *Laundry*, an

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<sup>16</sup> See Ferriter’s *The Transformation of Ireland: 1900-2000* and *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*.

industrial school, a prison, or a psychiatric hospital, and it was not uncommon for individual to be processed through the system from one type of institution to another.

This abuse of citizens who transgressed various (though often sexual) norms provides physical evidence of the workings of state power, aligned as it was with bourgeois economic power and the authority of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Hannah Arendt defines 'power', 'strength', 'force', 'authority' and 'violence' as 'distinct, different phenomena' which emerge as such when public affairs are no longer reduced to 'Who rules Whom'.<sup>17</sup> She defines the terms power and violence as follows:

'Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only as long as the group keeps together... *Authority* ... can be vested in persons .... or it can be vested in offices ... Its hallmark is unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey ... *Violence* is distinguished by its instrumental character' [italics in original]. (44)

Arendt's definition of violence here is closely aligned with Žižek's concept of subjective violence: recognizable, interpersonal actions performed by an agent against another or others. This, Žižek argues, is the most apparent form of violence and is the one that tends to dominate in news reports and political discourses of law and order. It is also the form of violence most commonly performed on stage, though in representation the subjective violence may stand for, or express, other forms of violence as well. *Laundry*, in its attempt to stage the invisible workings of a repressive state, does not stage subjective violence; the agent of the violence is largely absent in *Laundry*. Arendt's definitions of power and authority suggest a closer alignment with Žižek's definitions of symbolic and systemic violence, both of which he classifies as 'objective' forms of violence – operating seemingly without agency, and thus reflecting an unchangeable status quo. Symbolic violence is embodied in language, and involves 'the imposition of a certain universe of meaning' and systemic violence operates invisibly but is 'the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems' (2008: p.1). Arendt rejects the notion that violence is a prerequisite of power or that power is merely a façade for violence. Her argument is engaging, but is dependent on a very particular definition of violence. While violence is not a prerequisite of power, Žižek's definition of symbolic and systemic violence identify ways in which hegemonic structures and institutional power and authority may become corrupt and reliant on repressive measures to sustain themselves, or may engage with repressive measures to sustain normative social values and structures. This is clearly how power operated in the Irish state, in relation to this particular historical episode.

Relating Žižek's terms to the Magdalene Story draws upon discourses about women circulating in the twentieth century after the foundation of the state, which emphasize the importance of female chastity and the dangers *to the state* if women's sexuality is not tightly controlled. The control of female sexuality can be more easily regulated within marriage, with laws that limit married women's access to employment outside the home (repealed in the 1970s), laws that criminalize the sale or importing of contraceptives (repealed in the 1980s), and no legal provision for divorce (introduced in 1996). But legal controls are less effective than internalized social and cultural attitudes. The dominance of the Catholic Church in education and cultural life meant that attitudes towards sexuality were shaped by religious belief, while a deeply puritanical anxiety about respectability shaped officially sanctioned disgust towards the underclass (the impoverished urban and rural class) and a corresponding lack of sympathy or empathy with those deemed to have fallen, spiritually or socially. Respected community figures like the GP or the Parish Priest were normally engaged in the committal of the pregnant woman to a Mother and Baby home or a Laundry, thereby endorsing the

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<sup>17</sup> Hannah Arendt *On Violence* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1970): 43.

practice with a display of well-educated, professional authority, while the gender power relations at work there (men incarcerating women) reinforced and were reinforced by religious and cultural beliefs about the proper relative status of the sexes. It only adds to the sense of sexually active women as mad or criminal that the police were involved in catching those who escaped and returning them to the Laundries. Arendt's description of the operation of power by the group, and the unquestioning recognition of authority by its subjects, both find their reflection in this chapter of Irish life.

Luddy contrasts the official emphasis on the woman's natural, even sacred role as (married, monogamous) mother and the denigration of unmarried mothers.<sup>18</sup> She notes that from the late 1920s there are increasingly urgent public expressions of anxiety about women's presence in public life and their visibility in the public world. Key to the preservation of respectability and moral order is the woman's chaste reproductive sexuality and her confinement to the marital home. Unmarried mothers were a major source of concern and anxiety, and are described in terms of contagion; during the 1920s and 1930s the need to keep such women away from the rest of society becomes an increasing part of public and official discourses – though of course, there was no legal basis for the incarceration of the women. Luddy concludes, "The policing of sexual activities was to become a feature of Irish life for much of the twentieth century. This, allied with familial and community surveillance, exerted its greatest force on women" (2007: 89).

This process of vanishment is expressed in the performance in the seventh scene where the spectator is directed to sit in front of a full-length mirror which alternately shows the spectator, and a young Magdalen woman (Image 1). This visual palimpsest creates a fluidity of identity between the spectator and the woman, performing a relationship between the two and prompting spectator's sense of shared humanity. Like the moment where another performer inserts herself into an alcove beside a stained glass representation of the Virgin Mary (Image 2), these scenes open a series of cultural meanings and draw attention to the similarities and vast differences between the 'Fallen Woman' and the Virgin, or the spectator and the trapped girl. The richly coloured window in the Image 2, shows the Virgin and Child. The wealth apparent in the window contrasts with the girl's shadowed uniform. Her head is bowed as she reaches her fingertips against the unresponsive Virgin. The juxtaposition of the two figures suggests the religious and social everyday practice in Ireland that offered the Virgin as the ideal model for women to aspire to: modest, self-effacing, Mother and Virgin in one; and the impossibility of the model and the punishment for not conforming are evident in the other. The cruelty of the Laundries is made visible in that moment of performance and is glimpsed in the still image; but also visible is the pious impulse behind the abuse, the original good intention: the creation of an idealized Catholic State with an idealized population, a celibate's Utopia with sexual desire and its concomitant human chaos erased. There is no subjective violence represented in *Laundry*, only evidence violence having been done in its effects on its objects: the young uniformed women who inhabit the performance site, whose movements communicate an absence of hope and a fearful apprehension of an unseen but omniscient authority in their downcast eyes, hurried whispers, and frightened movements. The absence of nuns signifies the internalization of the surveillance and the invisibility of the system of power and violence that controls all the protagonists. The villain is not the individual nun, but the system that includes the spectators: the whole apparatus of the state.

The production attracted huge levels of publicity and public and critical attention, and sold out very quickly with spectators travelling from around the island of Ireland to see it. It is, of course, likely that many

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<sup>18</sup> Maria Luddy, 'Sex and the single girl in 1920s and 1930s Ireland', *The Irish Review*, 35 (Summer, 2007), 79-91.

spectators had some kind of familial or personal history with the Laundries. The various conversations around the show – in the media, in blogs, in academic circles and in general conversation – reported that on one occasion an actor was assaulted by a spectator who objected to the show's critique of the religious orders, and that attempts were made by the religious order concerned to block or censor the event taking place, and the harrowing nature of the performance was widely discussed.

Work like *Laundry*, Evelyn Glynn's exhibition, and the earlier plays of Patricia Burke-Brogan serve a function in creating artistic expressions that explore the emotional and cultural, as well as the historical, terrain of these abuses. They are also invaluable in documenting and recording a history that took place largely outside of state documentation, with the religious orders' failure to register deaths and births, and the burial of the dead in unmarked mass graves. These abuses operated systemically; they were part of the smooth running of the state, and integral to its narrative of its identity. They recall Gay McAuley's conception of 'vanishment', as a process by which these abjected individuals disappeared from public discourses and became invisible while still in plain sight. As such, they require a particular kind of representation: one that renders the agents of abuse invisible so that their place can be filled by the audience for the work. Anu Productions, by removing the nuns as the visible agents of abuse, place the spectators in the role of the customers who used the laundry – as people who knew, but did nothing. The unfolding of the performance and the isolation of the spectator create a phenomenological experience that emphasizes both the helplessness of the inmates, and the differently constructed helplessness of the citizenry, whose compliance with these institutions was approved by both the State and their Church. These recovered histories have generated intense communal sadness expressed in street demonstrations, public gatherings and parades, as expressions of shame and of support for survivors. While *Laundry* incorporates this chapter into its history of this area of Dublin, it also raises ethical questions about the responsibility of the individual to respond to systemic violence and abuse. This show, perhaps more than the others, seems to have sparked a moment of grief and bewilderment that recalls Pine's comment that the current cultural moment in the Republic of Ireland as one obsessed with the past, and with the discovery that 'We are not who we thought we were, or put another way, we remember ourselves differently now.' (2011: 2)